Engaging with the Other: Religion, Identity, and Politics in the Mediterranean

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Abstract

The Mediterranean has long been a space of encounter between different nations, religions, and cultures. The fusion of national and religious identity in the region has added complexity to current debates regarding the recognition and accommodation of religious minorities. In this introduction, we outline recent scholarship on religious nationalism and the governance of religious diversity in the Mediterranean. We draw upon the articles included in this special issue to highlight the distinctive modalities of the religion-national identity link that exist in the region, and the manner in which these modalities have influenced policies of religious accommodation and strategies of political mobilization among religious minorities. In concluding, we draw attention to the need for more studies that help to connect recent analyses of ethno-religious and political transformations in the Mediterranean with the work of historians and social scientists on the historical constitution and evolution of the region as an interconnected space in which core socio-political and cultural dynamics are shaped by cross-border flows, engagements, and exchanges.

Keywords: religion, identity, religious diversity, Islam, Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, secularization, Mediterranean

Introduction

At the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, the Mediterranean is a key space of encounter between distinct nations, cultures, and religions (Braudel 1972; Purcell and Horden 2000). While these encounters have, on many occasions, resulted in major conflict and bloodshed, they have also generated exchanges in information and knowledge that have proven critical to the development of modern civilization. With time, different societies in the region have taken distinct paths in their political, economic, and socio-cultural development. But despite these differences, religion has remained a lynchpin of national identity throughout the region.

The historical fusion of religion and national identity in Mediterranean societies has rendered current debates more complex regarding the recognition and accommodation of religious minorities. These debates have taken on new significance in recent years due to the profound social and political transformations that have transpired in the region. In Southern Europe, historically mono-confessional societies have become home to increasing numbers of religious minorities as a result of high levels of immigration from neighbouring areas (Pérez-Agote 2010; King 2001; Karyotis and Patrikios 2010). In several North African and Middle Eastern countries, relations between politics, law, and religion

have been unsettled and renegotiated as a consequence of the processes set in motion by the Arab Spring (Roy 2012; Panara and Wilson 2013; Lesch and Haas 2012). Moreover, the rise of political Islam in Turkey has generated significant unease among religious minorities in the country.

Most analysts of "religious nationalisms" emphasize their exclusivity toward religious minorities, whether real or imagined (Ignatieff 1994; van der Veer 1994; Zubrzycki 2006). According to Rieffer (2003), the development of religious national identities often entails the identification of "alien others" who are portrayed as a threat to the vitality of the nation. She writes:

> This tends to create internal moralities that give preference to the needs and interests of those inside the religious national community. One consequence of this preferencing is the common indifference or hostility to those outside the religious national community (p. 234).

Historical studies, and to an extent contemporary studies, of the Mediterranean in particular are replete with references to how the construction or fortification of religious nationalisms has entailed the subordination or persecution of religious minorities (Yiftachel 2006; Álvarez-Junco 2011; Zeidan 1999; Grigoriadis 2012; Perica 2004).

As Barker (2008) argues, the extent to which the form of nationalism present in a given country may be said to be "religious" does not hinge on the religiosity of the general populace or the formal relationship that exists between church and state. It hinges, rather, on whether belonging to a particular religion is part of the national self-concept and the tacit understandings that underlie national identifications. It also depends on the degree to which religious principles are reflected in national laws and policies pertaining to core aspects of social and personal life.

The presence of religious nationalism in a given society may influence the integration and accommodation of religious minorities in a variety of ways, some more directly than others. As Laurence and Vaïsse (2006) and others have highlighted, the fusion of religion and national identity commonly contributes to perceptions and (mis)representations of religious minorities as disloyal and unwilling to adopt the values and customs of the national community. In an effort to evade such characterizations, religious minorities may strategically refrain from pursuing strong forms of political recognition and engaging in practices that render their religious identities visible, instead emphasizing features that they share in common with the majority population (i.e. language or political ideology).

As an example, Dressler (this issue) shows how the reticence of religious minorities in Turkey to seek public recognition and accommodation derives largely from the continued dominance of Sunni Islam within Turkish imaginings of nationhood, despite the purportedly secular and neutral conceptions of national identity developed during the early years of the Turkish Republic. Given the historically negative connotations of the term "minority" in public discourse and the perceived incompatibility between minority status and national belonging, Alevis and other religious minorities in Turkey generally refrain from claiming rights on the basis of international conventions regarding minority rights, as doing so would reinforce their status as (excluded) minorities. At the same time, they strategically employ the semantics of international human rights discourse when fighting discrimination and exclusion. The complexity of minority politics in Turkey, Dressler writes, "shows that minority discourse should not be naively understood as a liberating or emancipatory discourse that as such empowers groups marginalized due to their ethnicity or religion," as is the case in most Western contexts.

The decision of religious minorities to strategically refrain form seeking explicit or strong forms of political recognition as a means of attaining measures of religious accommodation may be prudent in contexts where their presence is relatively novel within the ethno-religious landscape. The case of Malta is illustrative in this regard. In analyzing the Maltese context, Darmanin (this issue) argues that, given the relatively novel

presence of Islam and other minority religions in the country, strong forms of recognition and accommodation would likely precipitate social backlash, potentially heightening the prevalence of hate crime and other expressions of intolerance. There is no facile solution, however, as more minimalist forms of toleration ultimately do little to promote the lasting acceptance and appreciation of non-Catholic cultures and traditions in the country.

Although the religion-national identity link, to use Fokas' (this issue) terminology, is present in each of the countries analyzed in this issue, the modalities that it takes, the institutional and political contexts in which it is embedded, and its consequent ramifications for the accommodation of religious diversity vary significantly across different national contexts. While in some countries symbols and narratives of national identity are deeply entangled with majority religions, as in the case of Malta or Turkey, this entanglement is more lax in other countries. In Southern Europe, with the exception of Greece, the intertwining of religion and national identity, though certainly present, is less prohibitive of strong claims for recognition and rights by religious minorities than in other parts of the Mediterranean.

In Spain, for example, religious minorities have been quite forthright in seeking public recognition and special measures of accommodation (Rozenberg 1996; Fernández Coronado 1995). Although the Catholic Church enjoys special mention in the constitution and continues to receive significant public funding, the general population is deeply divided on questions of religion. For many, explicit references to religion and national identity arouse bitter memories of Franco's National Catholicism. Moreover, the specificities of Spain's democratic transition and subsequent projects aimed at refashioning Spain as a modern and plural society have given rise to a particular form of minority politics that has incentivized strong claims for religious recognition (Astor 2014). Unlike in Turkey, religious minorities in Spain do not experience great tension in seeking strong forms of recognition, on the one hand, and remaining firmly situated within the national community, on the other.

While there are clear differences in the degree to which religion and national identity are intertwined *across* countries in the Mediterranean, there are also important differences in public expressions of the connection between religion and national identity *within* countries, as well as in the impact of these expressions on the integration and accommodation of religion minorities. Building on Billig's (1995) classic work on "banal" forms of nationalism, Fokas (this issue) develops an analytic framework that distinguishes between "banal, benign, and pernicious" manifestations of the religion-national identity link. Focusing on the Greek context, she uses this framework to analyze distinct manifestations of the religion-national identity link in three main social domains: public education, laws regulating religious freedom, and the presence of clergy at state functions and national celebrations. Her analysis illuminates how distinct religious actors perceive and evaluate public manifestations of the religion-national identity link very differently, depending on their respective social positions and vantage points. For example, whereas Greek Orthodox clerics and public officials tend to view mandatory courses on Greek Orthodoxy as a "banal expression of the historical place of Orthodoxy in Greek society", religious minorities tend to view the content of such courses and the disincentives for soliciting exemptions as unfair and detrimental to their efforts to gain acceptance.

In theory, religious minorities residing in liberal democracies are shielded from many of the "pernicious" effects of the religion-national identity link by laws and institutions that protect their personal and collective rights and freedoms. However, in contexts where democratic institutions are less developed and weaker, religious minorities often do not enjoy such protections. Oraby's (this issue) analysis of the Egyptian context shows how, rather than acting as a neutral arbiter of citizen-initiated disputes against the state, the administrative judiciary (*Majlis al-Dawla*) has consistently based its deci-

sions on legal concepts like "public order" as a means of justifying the control and subjugation of religious minorities. Oraby focuses her analysis on the precarious legal status of converts in Egyptian society. Her findings highlight how state ideologies regarding religion and national identity, and the supposed dangers posed by religious Others, are reproduced through highly local judicial decisions regarding matters of personal status.

Although religious nationalism may have a significant influence on religious minorities' general sense of belonging, access to citizenship rights, and socio-political strategies, scholars must be cautious not to attribute too much explanatory power to religious nationalism *per se* when explaining specific dynamics of religious accommodation. As Bowen et al. (2013) persuasively argue, processes of religious accommodation are complex and generally do not flow straightforwardly from monolithic understandings of national identity or formal configurations of church-state relations. Rather, they are shaped by a variety of schemas, pressures, and priorities that are often specific to the historical development and practical functioning of different institutional spheres (Martínez-Ariño et al. 2015; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012).

Since public education is central to the transmission of national identity and a mandatory requirement for all youth regardless of religious affiliation, schools have become a key site for the negotiation of religious accommodation. Giorda (this issue) details the controversies that have emerged surrounding religious education, school canteens, and the presence of crucifixes in Italian schools. Her analysis shows how processes of ethno-religious diversification have sparked public reflection not only on questions regarding religion and national identity, but also on seemingly unrelated issues such as nutrition and health. With respect to school canteens, for instance, the growing presence of religious minorities with dietary restrictions has generated a broader dialogue about the quality and variety of food that Italian students are offered in school canteens. The degree to which local schools elect to accommodate the dietary restrictions of religious minorities may ultimately depend on the successful framing of more accommodating menus as nutritionally beneficial for all students and useful for fostering social cohesion among increasingly diverse student bodies.

While sensitivity toward religious pluralism may be greater in countries like Spain and Italy than elsewhere in the Mediterranean, due in part to the presence of weaker religious nationalisms, religious minorities – and particularly Muslims – nevertheless suffer significant discrimination and are often portrayed in a negative light, increasingly for their purported hostility toward the liberal, democratic, and secular traditions of the "West" (Joppke 2008; Adamson, Triadafilopoulos, and Zolberg 2011; Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012).[1] The flood of headlines regarding the atrocities committed by ISIS, sectarian violence in the Middle East, and the rise of political Islam in Turkey, as well as the media attention garnered by radical European Muslim leaders such as Anjem Choudary, have reinforced stereotypical representations of Islam as antithetical to Western modernity.

Several recent scholarly works on religion and politics in the Mediterranean echo this view. In a special issue dedicated to religion and democratization in the Mediterranean, for instance, Haynes and Ben-Porat (2013) argue that Muslim and non-Muslim religious actors in the Mediterranean "seek to remodel public life – including both social and political realities – according to their religious ideals and ethics, and to try turn the polity and its political direction away from a perceived real or perceived secularization which, they believe, seriously threatens to undermine religion's societal position" (p. 159). Although there are clearly many religious actors who resist

[1] The increasing prevalence of "illiberal liberalism" in European societies has led Joppke (2013) to conclude that, assuming a general commitment to pluralism, polities that embrace a "Christian identity" might actually be more accommodating of religious difference than polities that embrace "liberal state identities".

processes of secularization in the Mediterranean, such a characterization obscures the diversity of religious leaders and organizations in the region, some of which are quite liberal and supportive of core aspects of secularization.

Guia (this issue) shows how Muslim minorities in Spain have contributed to the process of democratic consolidation and supported key dimensions of secularization, most notably state neutrality. She contends that Muslim leaders have played an important role in pressuring the Spanish state to be more equal in its treatment of different religious confessions. Although the Catholic Church continues to enjoy far more privileges than other confessions, Muslims and other minority religious actors have made a degree of headway in promoting greater state neutrality. Guia's analysis reminds us that although there are certainly Muslim ideologues who have taken strong stances against secularism and democracy in Spain and other Southern European contexts, they are the exception as opposed to the norm. In general, Muslim leaders in the region have sought equality and freedom, as opposed to the imposition of religious norms.

While much has been written on religious nationalism and its influence on the accommodation of religious diversity within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, less has been written about its influence on diaspora politics and state policies aimed at citizens living abroad. Planet and Larramendi (this issue) show how the Moroccan state has devoted increasing attention to religious matters in its "diaspora policies." Specifically, it has invested significant resources into promoting the continued engagement of Moroccan ex-patriots with Islam through sponsoring organizations such as the European Council of Moroccan Ulema and facilitating the availability of imams and female spiritual guides for diasporic communities. Through encouraging sustained connection with Islam, the Moroccan state accomplishes its dual objective of fostering continued identification with the Moroccan nation and maintaining influence over the type of Islam embraced by Moroccans residing abroad.

Planet and Larramendi's contribution reminds us that the Mediterranean is an interconnected space, and that social and political dynamics oftentimes cut across national boundaries. Although taking national contexts as units of analysis remains useful for examining certain questions pertaining to the politics surrounding religious diversity in the region, there is a need for more studies regarding transnational processes that bear upon national and local governmental policies and social relations. Such studies would help to link recent analyses of ethno-religious and political transformations in the region with the work of historians and social scientists on the historical constitution and evolution of the Mediterranean as an interconnected space in which core socio-political and cultural dynamics are shaped by cross-border flows, engagements, and exchanges (Ben-Yehoyada 2014; Burke III 2014; Greene 2002).

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